

## The Unspeakable Secrets

### A letter-essay

Dear,

After some years of silence, I have decided to write you. But I am realizing that every word I write to you is a struggle. I can't remember the intimate space that I think used to exist between us. It is far and pale and not accessible. But I cannot find any other recognizable space either. There is a space in my mind where I can still meet you, but it is rather empty. An anonymous space accumulated with emptiness that makes me feel anxious. I'm not sure that we know each other anymore. I don't know to whom I write this letter.

Yet there is now an opportunity to write, to look back at a time when we used to think that we were getting closer to each other, but now, it seems, we were rather drifting apart.

You will probably never read this letter. To be honest, that is why I decided to write it. Instead of sending it to you, I am going to translate and share it in the public space of an exhibition with people who don't know us.

I've been thinking about the old Iranian houses again, the amazing buildings we knew as museums, or from the stories our parents told us. I think about the culture that those houses were built upon.

I think about this idea of dividing a house into distinct, named spaces [*the birouni, or "exterior," the rooms closest to the street; and*

*the andarouni, or “interior,” the innermost spaces*]. I’m drawn especially to the space of the *hashti*: the first space of the house, the space you first enter from the street, after walking down a winding *dalan*, or corridor. [*A hashti was usually built in the form of an octagon with a domed arch, and sometimes a skylight at its center. The word hasht, or eight, refers to the eight sides of the octagon.*] Every *hashti* holds three possibilities: to take the corridor to the street, to take the corridor to the *birouni*, or to take the corridor to the *andarouni*. There is also a fourth possibility: to wait there, sitting on the *hashti*’s platforms, for a short meeting or to receive permission to enter the other spaces. [*In wealthier houses, the hashti had other possibilities too, like paths to the stable or the servants quarters.*]

*Hashti* is the first private space a public visitor encounters; it’s also the most public of the home’s private spaces. It mediates between inside and outside, and is the connector of the home’s different areas — a passage, an in-between space, a limbo.

The *birouni* [*exterior*] often has a small garden and is where strangers and acquaintances are welcomed. It is the space that the owner shares with the public, like the public posts on our personal Facebook pages. I think it is also the most masculine space of the house, where male visitors meet with the head of the family (always a man).

The *andarouni* [*interior*] is usually built around a central garden, as the main space of family life. Only those who are trusted are received here — family members and close friends. It is the innermost core of the house. Although one can imagine even more divisions inside these spaces: in the interior some rooms were private, others were used for special events, some devoted to warm seasons, others to cold.

You and I never lived in a house like this, but these divisions are very familiar to us. I think that we also understand, intuitively, the forms of surveillance and control that they produce. Outside the limbo of *hashti* is the “public” space, which, despite its openness, is subject to the greatest control. Outside, the force that establishes “order” is also a force of homogeneity. And it pushes differences — or rather disagreements — into private space, where they have to be hidden like secrets. The complex spatial layout of these houses speaks of the marked difference between inside and outside.

And yet the same kind of power structure exists inside the house between different entities, and these spaces do not mean the same for everyone. Just like the outside, beings have different places and possibilities based upon their species, race, gender, age, etc. In fact the house was designed by a man, who decided where everyone should be. Women, for example, were to spend most of their time in the ‘interior’ — the most distant space to the public, where secrets had to be kept.

In more authoritarian structures, like the one that we grew up in, more life stories have to be kept hidden in private — to become secrets. Consequently there is also a greater interest in knowing about these secrets, a greater potential for betrayal. Although we both have secrets in our interiors, either of us can turn authoritarian, using — or rather abusing — private information as an instrument of power.

In this situation enforcing the boundary between these spaces feels more critical, and the decision over who is given access past the *hashti* of one’s house more sensitive. But at the same time, these borders lose their function entirely, because

whoever enters the private space and accesses a secret has potentially gained a weapon against the secret's owner. Every friend is potentially an enemy, a threat. And 'trust' is only an abstract notion.

Think about the intimate relationship between a man and a woman. A relationship that should be built based on trust. How can women inhabit structures that they haven't designed themselves? How can women participate in structures that do not allow them active roles? How can men and women be friends if they don't have the same power in these structures?

The *andarouni*, for women, is a semi-public space where they must share, or live, their private stories with someone who "by law" has more power than them. In the space of a marriage for instance, which is the most authorized and publicly accepted form of intimacy between a man and a woman, women do not have access to all rights. Marriage is a space of many secrets, and they should belong equally to both husband and wife. But the disclosure of these secrets does not always have similar consequences for both of them. Sometimes it not only won't cause any trouble for the man but it even brings him power.

So how is it possible for two people in such an unequal situation to trust each other? To become each other's confidant? How can an "intimate" relationship be really intimate?

In a way, all relationships seem to me like a *hashti*: undecided and uncertain. A space that is in the house but not inside the house. A *hashti* from where one will never arrive home.

I need to take some air

Dear,

Imagine meeting one another again in an imaginary *hashti*: an octagon room of possibilities. If we could meet anew at the entrance space of a relationship, what would we do? How would we design this *hashti*? What places would it take us to? Where would we choose to enter, or invite one another?

Can we imagine still choosing to trust? Would there be any room for that? Would we still be able to create secrets together? It's hard to imagine a friendship with no secrets. But how to imagine a private space where differences or secrets have no potential for being threats?

I like to imagine secrets that only exist as experience. Shared secrets that would be unspeakable, inexpressible to strangers. One could hide or reveal them in any space; within a glance for instance, or even within words.

*I wrote these letters, such that strangers did not know  
And you, out of benevolence, read as only you know*

One way to read this poem is to assume that Hafez [*Iranian poet, 1315-1390*] is writing, openly, of a secret, addressing the person with whom he shares it, and asking them to be generous enough to keep this secret protected.

But another reading might be that the poet, [*whose name means the (safe) keeper*] in writing these words, is sharing a secret

openly with all readers. A secret that, although is spoken out loud, can only be understood by a reader of great generosity.

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Yesterday I drew an octagon on paper and started to fold and unfold it in different ways. I continued doing so until no fold was recognizable anymore — they got lost within each other.

In the middle of this practice, through the folds that would connect different points of the octagon to one another, I came upon shapes which reminded me of old Iranian domes with a little round skylight in the middle, and all those lines and arches and folds that connect the octagon of the floor to a circle in the middle of the domed ceiling.

It seemed to me as if the artist, who was also caught in the uncertainty of the octagon, crafted the story of his struggle for finding a way out of this space, like a very elaborate poem, through the folds of *Muqarnas*, upon the ceiling of *hashti*. And the hole in the middle of the dome is like an emergency exit for the imagination and inspiration towards the infinite sky.

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